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AUTHOR Reichman, Susan L.
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ABSTRACT

The functions of the Evaluation Assistance Center-East (EAC-E), funded under Title VII of the Elementary Secondary Education Act are described. The EAC-E focuses on providing technical assistance (TA) to state and local educational agencies related to the evaluation of bilingual education programs. How TA is provided with regard to improving evaluation practices, service techniques that work, limitations to the provision of TA, and ways in which TA systems might become more effective are discussed. Premises under which the EAC-E operates include: (1) that services should be proactive as well as reactive; (2) that services should be closely coordinated with each state agency and other service providers in the region; (3) that TA must be feasible rather than merely theoretical; and (4) that a variety of techniques for providing TA are appropriate. These techniques include: (1) conference presentations; (2) workshop training sessions; (3) on-site visits to clients; (4) telephone and written communications; and (5) development and use of print materials. The overall quality of services provided to the limited-English proficient student can be improved by evaluation TA. (SLD)

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IMPROVING TITLE VII EVALUATIONS THROUGH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE: ARE THERE APPROACHES WHICH CAN ENHANCE THE SYSTEM?

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Dr. Susan L. Reichman
Deputy Director, Education Assistance Center-East
RMC Research Corporation

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INTRODUCTION

The provision of technical assistance to state and local educational agencies, as well as specifically funded projects, has become a multi-million dollar endeavor in the last ten years. Across the country, many groups are operating centers specifically to provide assistance in areas ranging from curriculum and technology to program evaluation and improvement. One such group of technical assistance providers is the Evaluation Assistance Center (EAC), funded by the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs in the U.S. Department of Education, under ESEA Title VII. Two regional EACs were funded with the intended purpose of providing technical assistance in evaluation to state agencies and local projects recipients of Title VII funds. The issues to be addressed in this paper include how technical assistance is provided in regard to improving evaluation practices, service techniques which appear to work, limitations to the provision of technical assistance and ways in which technical assistance systems might be changed in order to become more effective.

BACKGROUND - TITLE VII FUNDING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

In 1968 the Bilingual Education Act was passed, allocating Federal monies to local school districts for the development of bilingual programs to meet the needs of limited-English proficient students. Since that time the Bilingual Education Act has undergone a series of amendments which have refined and expanded services provided under Title VII funding. While some of the amendments directly address the types of services provided to students, other changes have focused on improving evaluation activities and the provision of technical assistance to recipients of Title VII funds.

Some key changes during this time period relating directly to the issue of technical assistance have included:

- the 1976 funding of three support centers (Training Resource Centers, Dissemination Assessment Centers and Materials Development Centers) to provide a variety of technical assistance services to projects;

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- the 1978 amendments to reorganize service provision centers to avoid overlapping services (TRCs became Bilingual Evaluation Service Centers; DACs became Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Centers; and MDCs became Materials Development Projects);

- the 1983 funding which created the Multifunctional Support Centers (MRCs); and,

- the 1984 amendments which authorized two Evaluation Assistance Centers.

The 1984 amendments placed the responsibility for providing technical assistance in the area of program evaluation directly in the hands of one type of technical assistance center.

The need for evaluation technical assistance has been stimulated from two directions: changes in federal funding for bilingual education and research studies regarding the effectiveness of these programs. The allocation for Title VII Part A monies has prompted questions focusing on the impact of bilingual education in general and the effectiveness of the various projects receiving these monies. The increase in programs designed specifically to meet the needs of limited-English proficient students has led to the implementation of research into the effectiveness of these programs. However, rather than being able to successfully answer questions regarding the success of bilingual programs, the studies themselves became the targets for criticism regarding the poor quality of the projects' evaluation activities (Zappert and Cruz, 1977; Dulay and Burt, 1978; Troike, 1978; Douglas and Johnson, 1981; Okada, et al., 1982, 1983; Baker and de Kanter, 1983; Tallmadge, et al., 1987).

As part of the effort to improve the quality of evaluation activities, the Title VII Part A Regulations (P.L. 98-511, Section 733) now specify that the evaluation design must include "... a measure of education progress of Title VII project participants when measured against an appropriate nonproject comparison group" (34 CFR, Section 500.50). Other requirements include: (1) an evaluation which is representative of all persons, schools or agencies served by the programs; (2) the use of reliable and valid evaluation instruments and procedures; (3) evaluation procedures which minimize error; (4) the collection of a variety of background and descriptive information covering the project, present participants and past participants; and, (5) non-test data, such as grades and attendance rates, as further indicators of project effectiveness.

Funding for the two Evaluation Assistance Centers (EACs) was allocated with the specific goal of improving the quality of program evaluation. As stated in the original request for proposals (RFP 85-127), the objectives of the EACs were:

- To provide technical assistance to state and local educational agencies related to the evaluation of bilingual education programs such as those funded under the Bilingual Education Act.

- To collect and synthesize information on program evaluation alternatives and strategies applicable to programs

of instruction such as those funded under Part A of the Act and use the information to provide requested evaluation technical assistance.

- To provide technical assistance regarding methods and techniques for identifying the educational needs and competencies of limited English proficient persons.

In October, 1985 the EAC-East (with Georgetown University as the prime contractor and RMC Research as the sub-contractor) was funded to provide services to 31 states, the District of Columbia and the territories of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. A year later the EAC-West (with the University of New Mexico as the prime contractor and RMC Research as the sub-contractor) initiated services to the western half of the country.

EAC-EAST APPROACH TO THE PROVISION OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Over the last three years the EAC-East has refined its approach to technical assistance in such a way such that it is both responsive to the required scope of work and flexible enough to meet the variety of client needs which exist in a geographically large and diverse service area. The foundation for providing technical assistance is based on the premises that for a center of this type to be effective:

- services should be proactive as well as reactive in nature;
- technical assistance should be coordinated closely with each state education agency and, where possible, with other service providers in the region;
- the content of the technical assistance provided should seem feasible in terms of implementation from a local project perspective; and,
- services should be provided using a variety of techniques rather than a single approach.

While these four premises may seem obvious, the actual implementation of such an approach for the provision of technical assistance is not so straight forward.

Premise 1: Development of a Proactive and Reactive System

A major issue in regard to the provision of technical assistance is how the system operates as a whole. Technical delivery systems can be reactive in nature, waiting for clients to initiate contact through service requests, or systems can actively promote use by initiating planning activities with clients. For a variety of reasons, the proactive approach is one that appears to contribute more effectively to actual change over time. What are some of the reasons for developing a proactive, rather than reactive technical assistance system?

Proactive systems initiate and encourage contacts, rather than waiting for clients to request assistance. Unfortunately, the field of education is such that staffing changes are a frequent occurrence. While one project manager may be aware of a technical assistance provider, that information is often lost when new staff enter the picture. Further, many individuals are hesitant to contact service providers who they have not formally met in some type of professional situation. Finally, and in some ways most importantly, a proactive system seeks to involve the end users in planning services -- an activity that encourages support and use of the system, leading to a willingness to implement suggestions of the service providers.

Another advantage of establishing a proactive system for providing technical assistance is that this promotes viewing needs on a long-term, rather than short-term basis. While a reactive system tends to simply solve immediate problems, the proactive system can analyze long-term goals, then consider how they can best be attained over time. This view is especially compatible in regard to making an overall improvement in program evaluations. This is not a change that can be made quickly, over a short time period, but rather involves changing many ingrained attitudes and traditions -- the type of change that must be worked on slowly and in manageable steps.

Needless to say, the technical system must also be somewhat reactive in nature. The area of evaluation is one in which there are always immediate requests and needs to be dealt with. Client requests for services should always be accommodated in a timely fashion. Furthermore, for a technical assistance center to succeed it must be responsive to client's short-term needs. So a technical assistance center must find a way to balance striving for long-term goals and, concurrently, respond appropriately to immediate client needs.

Premise 2: Close Coordination of Services

A second necessity for ensuring the effectiveness of a technical assistance system is that of close coordination with state education agencies (SEAs) and other service providers in the region. Coordination with activities and goals of the SEA has a variety of advantages of special relevance to improving evaluation practices. In the case of the EAC-East, the approach to coordination has been through the development of annual letters of agreement delineating activities which will be conducted in the state. This type of coordination provides a means whereby the EAC-East services are compatible with each state's long-term goals and preferences. Coordination in this manner also helps alleviate any concerns that a state may have regarding possible conflicts in preferred approaches and provides a way to ensure cooperative planning toward key goals.

Program evaluation in general is both a politically sensitive issue and one that is sometimes difficult to address at the project level. Close coordination with each SEA helps ensure both acceptance and use of the service providers, as well as increasing potential impact of the system. Even though Title VII projects are funded by federal monies, they are also part of the state and local school system, with various regulations that must be met at those levels. Providing technical assistance that is compatible across all requirements and works toward reaching the common goal of improving program evaluations can best be approached by close coordination with each state.

Coordination of another type -- with other service providers such as the Chapter 1 Technical Assistance Centers and the Multifunctional Resource Centers -- is another important element in a technical assistance system. While some service providers have funding which includes the conduct of state and regional conferences, some systems, such as the EACs, do not have this flexibility. In order to reach the most clients in a cost-effective manner, it is important to be able to participate in activities organized by other groups. Additionally, developing a working relationship with other service providers, rather than operating in a competitive mode, leads ultimately to better services for the clients.

Premise 3: Assistance Which is Feasible

One of the most difficult tasks in regard to providing technical assistance in the area of evaluation is that of translating theory into practice. What is most correct from a technical point of view may not always be possible to put into action in a local school district. This is not to say that one must accept the frequently voiced objections to conducting a good program evaluation. Rather, a balance must be found between what is technically appropriate and what can reasonably be done at the project level.

Technical assistance centers must therefore be sensitive to the limitations under which evaluations are conducted at the local level. Technical expertise to conduct detailed statistical analyses or implement sophisticated evaluation activities may not be available at the local level. Furthermore, program evaluation is often perceived as something done simply to meet federal or local requirements. Often the understanding of how evaluation results can be used at the local level for activities such as program improvement, general planning or gaining local support is missing.

In order to affect long-term changes in regard to improved evaluation procedures, it is critical that clients "buy" into the idea of conducting quality program evaluations for their own use, as well as for meeting various federal or state requirements. This again is something that will not occur over a short term basis, but rather is developed over time. Likewise, it is essential that evaluation techniques be adapted and presented in ways that are feasible at the local level. Evaluation techniques that are theoretically correct but too difficult to implement will serve only to reinforce opinions that good evaluations are too impractical to be conducted by most projects.

Premise 4: Use of a Variety of Techniques for Providing Assistance

The most common approaches for providing technical assistance by the EAC-East include: (1) presentations at large-scale conferences; (2) intensive workshop training sessions; (3) on-site visits to clients; (4) telephone and written communications; and, (5) the development and dissemination of print materials. Each of these approaches, as would be expected, have appropriate uses and associated limitations. In addition, the environment in which technical assistance is provided in some cases dictates decisions regarding which approach must be used.

(1) Presentations at large-scale conferences. One of the ways in which technical assistance is provided is through presentations at national, regional, state and local conferences organized by other groups. These presentations tend to be conducted in fairly short time blocks (generally, 1 to 1 1/2 hours). Topics typically cover a broad spectrum of evaluation issues, ranging from test selection to evaluation models to data analysis procedures. This type of session has one major disadvantage -- the limited time available for the presentation. Those planning the conference presentations often request a large amount of content in a small amount of time, and in many cases the appropriate amount of detail cannot be provided to the clients.

On the other hand, these sessions do have a number of advantages regarding to the provision of technical assistance. One of the primary uses for these conferences is as a vehicle for making initial contacts with new clients. An ongoing problem with any technical assistance service, as mentioned earlier, is that clients tend not to initiate contact unless they are familiar with those who are providing the assistance. Large-scale conferences of this type provide a needed way for service providers to meet potential clients.

Another advantage to the use of large-scale conferences is that they are fairly cost-effective in nature. The service providers can contact large numbers of potential clients, without the financial or staff burden that would be associated with arranging other activities of this type. Further, Title VII project directors generally do not have the opportunity to explore new approaches with peers outside of their immediate district, much less from individuals located in other states. The opportunity to bring clients together to address areas from a broader perspective often results in new and better approaches.

Finally, there are some evaluation issues which can legitimately and effectively be treated in brief sessions and where the content can then be transferred to the project setting. For example, a presentation explaining the Title VII Evaluation Regulations can be completed within an hour, resulting in clients who are then aware of the requirements which their evaluation activities should meet. Awareness of the regulations generally leads to follow-up contacts with service providers regarding how the evaluation activities should be structured to meet a project needs and unique constraints. There are, in fact many basic issues which can effectively be treated in large-scale workshops, both as way to impart information and to generate interest through presentations which introduce ideas to participants.

(2) Intensive workshop training sessions. Another approach to the provision of technical assistance is through the use of more intensive training sessions. These sessions (generally a half or full day) provide a way to bring clients together to address specific topics in more detail. As with short conference presentations topics tend to vary, ranging from detailed sessions on evaluation models to presentations on a series of related issues (such as a combined session on Title VII Evaluation Regulations, evaluation models, and reporting evaluation results). Clearly the major advantage of this kind of training is that it provides a way to address specific content issues in enough depth to promote change at the project level.

Intensive workshop training sessions, when planned appropriately, provide a forum for the trainer to give clients the opportunity to explore the theoretical base for a particular topic and also the practical approaches for implementation. Opportunities for simulated activities and hands-on training in the context of the project can be used during these workshops, increasing the likelihood that the information imparted will be implemented by clients in their project settings.

The major constraint to the use of this approach for providing technical assistance is in regard to client time. It is often difficult for clients to allocate a large block of time for training in a specific area. Travel time for a single training event, the perceived need to hear about a variety of topics rather than one issue in depth, an already overloaded calendar of meetings, and no release time for some staff are some of the types of objections heard when this type of training is proposed.

(3) On-site visits to clients. A potentially effective way to cause change is by direct on-site visits to clients. This is often one of the best ways for the technical assistance provider to gain the in-depth understanding of a project and problems which need to be addressed in order to improve evaluation activities. Seeing a project in operation and working directly with the staff can often effect changes that would otherwise not occur. Problems that might not otherwise be uncovered often come to light. Additionally, on-site visits help develop long-term relationships with clients, leading to more requests for assistance and, ultimately, more in the way of improvements.

This is also one of the most costly ways to provide technical assistance, especially when clients are distributed around a large geographic region. For this type of assistance to have an impact, more must happen than a simple visit to the site. Time must be taken to carefully review the project proposal and any other documentation, such as evaluation reports which exist. Follow-up after the site visit may also require extensive time and planning, as well as the possibility of additional on-site visits.

Another consideration to providing technical assistance through on-site visits is the client-related issue of trust. Some clients are hesitant to share issues such as evaluation plans or request site visits until after they get to know the service provider. For this reason, requests for on-sites are often an added benefit of conference presentations and workshops which the client has previously attended.

(4) Telephone and written communications. A fourth approach for providing technical assistance is the use of telephone and written communications. The existence of a toll-free telephone number provides clients with a way to request information of an immediate nature, covering again a broad range of issues from tests which are available for a particular area to quick assistance on converting test scores. Assistance provided in this manner has the advantage of not requiring travel. But, as with other modes for providing assistance, clients often are not aware or do not take advantage of the system until after they are familiar with those who provide the technical assistance.

Written communications are another surprisingly effective mode for providing technical assistance to clients, especially after the initial contact has been made. Written communications can be used to provide services in areas ranging from detailed information on specific tests to a complete review of a project's evaluation plan, including suggestions for improvements. This approach to technical assistance is a way in which detailed and specific information can be given to a client in a fairly cost-effective manner.

Needless to say, telephone and written communications generally go hand-in-hand in regard to the provision of technical assistance. Typically the request for assistance is initiated by the client via telephone. After this contact the technical assistance provider can collect additional information through further calls or by requesting specific written information from the client. Then, depending upon the request, the actual assistance can be provided either by telephone or in writing. As with conference presentations and workshops, these contacts often lead to further requests for technical assistance.

(5) The development of print materials. The final approach to technical assistance to be mentioned here is that of developing print materials for dissemination to clients and those who do training with these same individuals. The development of materials serves a variety of purposes both for those providing and for those receiving the technical assistance. For those who provide the technical assistance it is very important to have materials which can be "pulled off the shelf" rather than re-inventing the items every time a topic is covered. This makes special sense when technical assistance is provided over a defined area -- in this case evaluation. While many new topics constantly crop up and every request has its own twist, there are some basic issues which frequently reappear. While developing materials is a time-consuming activity, the existence of materials that have been carefully planned, reviewed and revised saves time in the long run and increases the ultimate quality of the assistance provided.

From the client's point of view, print materials are essential. Most Title VII project directors have training in areas other than program evaluation. Furthermore, these individuals often deal with evaluation issues on a periodic basis. Their daily tasks tend to revolve around programmatic and management activities. So, while a project manager may attend a training session on Title VII Evaluation Regulations, evaluation models or test selection in the summer, this information may not actually be put to use until a much later date. Providing clients with a variety of print materials such as checklists and summary sheets is one way to help ensure that information imparted is actually used at the project level.

Finally, the availability of print material provides a way to provide more in-depth technical assistance as follow-up to telephone contacts or in conjunction with written communications. Again, having information which can be pulled off the shelf, rather than rewriting the information every time, results in technical assistance which is more consistent and cost-efficient in nature.

CONSTRAINTS TO IMPROVING PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

Needless to say, there are constraints to the provision of evaluation technical assistance which have direct implications for how effective the system will be in regard to improving program evaluation activities. In some cases there is resistance in the field to the implementation of procedures which will increase the quality of the evaluations. It would seem that resistance has developed for a variety of reasons, including: a lack of understanding regarding how valuable well-planned evaluation can be at the local level; confusion over techniques which are appropriate for individual student assessment purposes and those which are suitable for program evaluation purposes; the use of evaluation techniques which are technically difficult to implement at a local level without ongoing assistance; and, a concern over the potential use of evaluation results in ways that will be detrimental to the programs.

A good example of how attitudes toward program evaluation can be changed is the situation that has evolved in Title I/Chapter 1 programs. The realization that evaluation activities can be very useful at the local level has been occurring in Chapter 1 programs over the last few years. The perceived burden of conducting program evaluations has been transformed into a fairly "automatic" activity. The expectations regarding evaluation activities are fairly clear and technically straightforward to implement. Over time, many of the evaluation procedures have been internalized within districts, thus freeing staff to actually begin considering how to use results and improve their evaluations.

The evaluation process is not so simple for Title VII projects. First, these projects have only recently had to address meeting any type of evaluation requirements. Second, because Title VII projects serve a wide diversity of audiences and have different programmatic needs, proposed evaluation models are generally more complex in nature than those suggested for Chapter 1 purposes. (For example, a Title VII project may serve students who are very different in their educational background and needs; something which should be addressed in the program evaluation.) At the project level it is very difficult to realize the worth of evaluation procedures when the major concern is in trying to understand exactly what has to be done in evaluation and how to meet the requirements.

These projects often have to deal with a variety of language groups and levels of academic achievement, making the issue of testing for program evaluation difficult to address. A related problem here is the lack of awareness regarding the importance of using quality tests for evaluation purposes; that is, the use of tests which meet the basic psychometric standards necessary for a sound program evaluation. In some cases, the unfortunate choice is the use of tests designed to identify students as limited-English proficient for the purpose of measuring growth or project impact. Other frequent testing issues which affect the quality of program evaluations include the use of tests which have very low reliability, unreported validity, and very limited norming procedures. For those providing evaluation technical assistance, a significant amount of time must be allocated to the provision of training in appropriate uses of various types of tests and the need for careful test selection. Appropriate testing procedures must be in place in order to implement good evaluation designs.

Another constraint to improving evaluations at the project level is the complexity of appropriate evaluation models. For evaluation activities to become more institutionalized they must be clear enough to be implemented at the local level, by personnel who do not have a detailed background in program evaluation or statistics. Systems which appear complex or require detailed analysis level serve only to discourage local projects from implementing appropriate evaluation procedures. Those who provide technical assistance in the field of evaluation need to keep in mind the fact that Title VII project managers are experts in the field of curriculum and instruction, not program evaluation or statistics. In order to improve program evaluations, models must be presented in ways that encourage, not discourage, their use.

A final constraint to improving evaluation practices is an attitudinal issue which is sometimes voiced in the field: the concern that the results of an evaluation will be used against a project. Program evaluation seems, at times, to be perceived as a negative rather than a beneficial activity; something which has as a primary goal the criticism of the project. But if projects are effectively providing students with skills necessary for success, as it would appear to those who are familiar with the programs, in the long run the lack of evaluation data serves only to be detrimental to the projects. So, from the point of view of the technical assistance provider, in order to improve program evaluations, it is first necessary to convince those involved of the need for objective evidence which substantiates claims of program effectiveness.

IMPROVING PROGRAM EVALUATIONS THROUGH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

There are some steps which can be taken to improve the overall quality of program evaluations. While some of the activities fall into the realm of those providing evaluation technical assistance, others include steps that must be initiated at different levels. Those providing technical assistance must ensure that the system addresses both immediate and long-term issues which ultimately lead to improving the quality of local evaluation activities. In addition to clarifying evaluation regulations, technical assistance should promote the value of evaluation activities at the local level.

The content of evaluation-related technical assistance should be presented in a manner that is practical in terms of implementation at the local level, but also technically sound. Evaluation models which are flexible enough to accommodate the variety of Title VII projects and audiences served should be encouraged. Issues and problems specific to bilingual education should be taken into account in proposed evaluation models. Rather than proposing a single evaluation model for all projects, designs should be selected which focus on relevant evaluation questions. In this way, emphasis can be shifted to encouraging projects to answer relevant evaluation questions rather than conducting superficial activities. This type of overall evaluation emphasis should be accompanied by clearly defined minimum evaluation standards, addressing issues such as appropriate testing, data collection requirements, data analysis procedures, and other basic standards which lead to quality evaluations.

The methods in which technical assistance is provided should maintain certain key qualities which can contribute to long-term success in regard to improving evaluation procedures at the local level. Establishing and maintaining a technical assistance system which is capable of moving toward clearly defined long-term goals as well as immediate client needs is one key element. Ensuring coordination with federal and state directions, as well as other service providers, all working toward a common goal of improved evaluations, is another basic element. Promoting evaluation activities which are both feasible and meaningful at the local level is a third key element. Finally, the technical assistance center should maintain a flexible, multi-faceted approach to the provision of technical assistance and avoid the trap of thinking that one mode of assistance is most appropriate for improving all aspects of program evaluations.

There are some changes outside of the realm of the technical assistance providers which could also contribute to long-term improvements in the area of local program evaluations, including:

- placing more emphasis on the "value" of a quality evaluation plan when Title VII applications are reviewed for funding and, additionally, allocating more funds for projects which propose detailed evaluation activities;

- developing mechanisms for providing technical assistance to projects regarding components of a good evaluation plan prior to the actual project implementation stage; and,

- promoting, at a national level, evaluation procedures and models which take into account characteristics of bilingual students which have implications for how growth occurs over time;

While the issues around the evaluation of bilingual programs are complex and which cannot be resolved on a short-term basis, concerted efforts by evaluation technical assistance providers, in conjunction with federal, state, and local activities, can make a difference. A common goal of implementing quality evaluations for both accountability and program improvement can be reached and should lead, in turn, to improving the overall quality of services provided to limited-English proficient students.

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